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Stirling - Carlyle's Counsels to a Literary Aspirant - 1886

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THOMAS CARLYLE'S COUNSELS

TO A LITERARY ASPIRANT

THOMAS CARLYLE'S COUNSELS

TO A LITERARY ASPIRANT

A HITHERTO UNPUBLISHED LETTER OF 1842

AND WHAT CAME OF THEM

WITH A BRIEF ESTIMATE OF THE MAN

BY

JAMES HUTCHISON STIRLING, LL.D. EDIN.

EDINBURGH: JAMES THIN, SOUTH BRIDGE
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NOTE.

It will be seen from the *setting* of the following that it was, in the first instance, intended for a Periodical.

It may eventually be followed by a more detailed estimate, and several other letters of the great writer in question.

A LETTER OF CARLYLE'S

FORTY-FOUR YEARS OLD.

THE character of Thomas Carlyle seems one of still great and unsatisfied interest; and the following letter of his, which has hardly been seen by anybody but myself (it will surprise my own family), may tend to draw some of us perhaps to think more *piously* in his regard than has been common of late:—

CHELSEA, 18*th January* 1842.

MY DEAR SIR,—The decision you so earnestly expect ought at least to be sent you soon; unfortunately, it is all the kindness I can show you at present.

I have read the whole of your prose manuscript. If you knew what an element

one lives in here, this of itself might be proof that you are worth something to me! The poetic manuscript I have not read in whole, but only in parts—such parts as seemed sufficient for grounding a practical conclusion on; and this I now in great haste proceed to transmit you.

It appears to me clearly altogether improbable that any bookseller, in these times of the book-trade, would so much as consent to publish your MS. at his own cost, far less pay down any sum of money for it. Nay, I am not at all sure, harsh as this may seem, that it were for your own real good to have it published, to have it what is even called "succeed." There is undoubtedly sign of talent in it; but talent in far too loose, crude, and unformed a condition. To have *such* accounted real finished talent, and praised and preached abroad, is precisely the fatallest future for a youth of

any merit,—the sweetness in the mouth which in the belly becomes bitter as gall. You will understand all that better, I hope, some ten years hence, and twenty years hence better still. But, on the whole, however that may be, I hesitate not to pronounce your poem entirely unworkable as a financial element, in this place, at this time; and advise you not to spend more effort in that direction, but to quit it altogether for some more promising one. I at least, who know hardly any bookseller, and have indeed small sympathy with their trade and aims at present, must profess my inability to make any helpful use of this MS. I will, if you still request it, submit the paper to the publisher of *Fraser's Magazine*, the only bookseller I speak to once in six months; but I must say beforehand that I think he has no chance to accept it. This is my sincere

verdict. A much politer and softer to the ear might easily have been written; but my words are to do you good if they can, and a deeper feeling of regard orders me to avoid all flattering unctions in your case.

You seem to me a young man to whom Nature has given a superior endowment, which you run a considerable risk of *failing* to unfold. Alas, it is so easy to fail! You have in you that generous warmth of heart which is usually, if it be well-guided, the mother-soil of all sorts of talent; but which also, if ill-guided, can run up into miserablest waste and weeds. Your mind is opening in many directions, great ideas or prophecies of ideas announcing themselves to you; all this is well, and the best. But, as I can discern withal, all this must as yet be kept in, held down with iron rigour, till it fashion and articulate itself: the cruellest waste for it were to dig it all out at present

as germinating seed, to let it all rush up as worthless spurry and chickweed. My dear young friend, you must learn the indispensable significance of hard, stern, long-continued *labour*. Grudge not labour, grudge not pain, disappointment, sorrow, or distress of any kind—all is for your good, if you can endeavour and endure. If you cannot, why then it is all hopeless. No man ever grew to anything who durst not look death itself in the face, and say to *all* kinds of martyrdom, "*Ye* shall not subdue me!" Be of courage; a man lies in you: but a man is not born the second time, any more than the first, without travail. Your desultory mode of study hitherto has probably been a great misfortune—a thing to be pitied, as I well know, and not to be blamed as times now go; but it is a thing you must correct and get the better of. I fancy I discern in you, indeed, a certain natural tendency to

haste, crudity, semi-articulate diffusion. I earnestly entreat you, stand up against that unmercifully as against your worst foe! It will never do. The world wants alcohol, not beer-wort. It is a crime to produce the latter, if the former be in you. You must learn the meaning of *silence*,—that forgotten knowledge of silence I am always speaking of. Be in no haste to speak yourself. Why be *porous*, incontinent? Nothing can ferment itself to clearness in a *colander*. Pray that you may be *forced* to hold your tongue. The longer you keep silence, the richer will your speech be when it does come.

Practically, my advice were very decidedly that you *kept* by medicine; that you resolved faithfully to learn it, on all sides of it, and make yourself in actual fact an Ἰατρὸς, a man that *could heal disease*. I am very serious in this. Pecuniary means will occasion difficulty [there was no such difficulty

in reality]; but they need not prove insuperable if you bestir yourself. If a man bestir himself, what thing *is* insuperable? Your present wishes, tastes, etc., ought to go for little with you. A man who cannot gird himself into harness will take no weight along these highways! I would even advise that you resolutely postponed, into the unexplored uncertainty of the Future, all concern with literature; determined to set no store by that, to let it come or stay away as it might chance to like. As a trade, I will protest against your meddling with it; describe it as the frightfullest, fatallest, and too generally despicablest of all trades now followed under the sun. He that can, Mithridates-like, make poison his aliment, let him live in it, and conquer (by *suffering*) first of all; let no other try it. A steady course of professional industry has ever been held the usefullest support for *mind* as well

as body: I heartily agree with that. And often I have said, What profession is there equal in true nobleness to medicine? He that can abolish pain, relieve his fellow-mortal from sickness, he is the indisputably usefullest of all men. Him savage and civilised will honour. He is in the right, be in the wrong who may. As a Lord Chancellor, under one's horse-hair wig, there might be misgivings; still more perhaps as a Lord Primate, under one's cauliflower: but if I could heal disease, I should say to all men and angels without fear, *En, ecce!*

If Literature do unfold itself at length under shelter of such a profession, then let literature be welcome; it will be safe, beneficial, and have a chance to be true and wise, in such circumstances. How many true physicians have turned out to be true speakers, or even singers! A man *can* first speak when he has got to *know* something;

and knowledge comes from experience alone. My decided advice is, that you stand resolutely by medicine, determined to find an honest livelihood by medicine, and do a man's task in that way. Then is there a solid *backbone* in one's existence, round which all manner of beautiful and wholesome things will grow.

And so farewell for the present; and a good genius guide you,—a good, patient, valiant heart, which is the best of all geniuses! I have not time to write another word.—Yours, with many good wishes,

T. CARLYLE.

The generous welcome in the above to the mere callow enthusiasm of young literature in a complete stranger,—the wonderfully ungrudging sacrifice both of time and labour in it,—the earnest sincerity and inestimable weight of the counsels,—the incomparable felicity of the characteristic figures,—the perfectly admirable finish of the composition generally: all this cannot but impress, and even

surprise. There is a flood to the heart with the exclamation, "That is the true *grit;*" and Carlyle, after all, must have been superlatively a "fine fellow," a really good, true, and great man!

That Carlyle, in his daily life, was not always on the transcendent level of the above, is only natural. The hero may do battle in his coat of mail; but it is in chamois leather that he takes his meals. Eminent men, in short, as they possess, for the most part, both a language of the gods and a language of men, so, for the most part also, are they similarly duplicate in character. There is the ideal man, high and pure, in his own inner; and there is the real man in his week-day limits; these are at once and together. Man, generally, indeed, is always, as his abode the earth is, half a light and half a shadow. The pity is, for Carlyle, that it is mostly the shadow side that is turned to us at present. It is not a side that is best in anybody; and it is certainly not Carlyle's best. Had Carlyle never written, but just gone about dumb, as it were, I do not know that he would have been a favourite with many people.

Families in Scottish humble life are not in general remarkable for polish. It is a proverb, we know, that "bitin' and scartin' 's Scotch folk's wooing;" and we often see as much to be the rule of their in-

tercourse in the children, intermitted, it may be, by the sulks and silence of exhaustion. What Robert Chambers says of the Burns family, or better, the "Cottagers of Glenburnie," is really no intolerable picture of the situation; and there is no reason to think that Carlyle was brought up on more than a modified pattern. Neither is it to be supposed that, on the whole, it would tend to make him, in any degree, more socially perfect that, as eldest, and son, and educated, and taking on education, he was pretty well looked up to both by father and by mother. And, if looked up to by them, he, the big brother, there in his silentness and peculiarness, must have been only gaped at, as it were, from corners, by the rest of the household. The effect of such petting as this in the family may be conceived to have followed Carlyle out of it. For one thing, he seems to have mostly felt towards people on the outside as towards strangers with whom he was to be constrained, and on his good behaviour, and alien. In the country-houses of the great it is pleasant to see how he makes up to the plain, honest steward, or the sagacious, experienced butler. It was only at his mother's fireside that he was really home again. In the house, or out of the house, he might be wandering about and about, morose, without a word or a

look to any one, gaped at, as said, silently by brothers and sisters; but, in good truth, all the while, he was feeling in the ease and fulness and reality of his own at last—at least as nearly so as was possible at all for that yearning, longing, insatiate soul.

Even in the boy, on his first tramp from Ecclefechan to Edinburgh, we can see crop out this feeling of alienation towards others. He looks askance at the lively, whistling lad, who is there in effect only to show him the way and take care of him. He must fall behind, in his sulks and self-esteem, and mingled apprehension and disparagement of others, and criticise with aversion both the whistling and the whistler. Later, with what exacting, uncouth ways he meets the Bullers, though only the well-paid tutor of pupils confessed to be, in some respects, in advance of himself! In these same days, too, with what strange feelings he views, as with what strange words he afterwards derides, the eminent medical man who suggested to him, for his complaint, to try without tobacco for a time! It is a veritable Rousseau that enjoys the rapture of that rebellious pipe in the end! Similar illustrations of Carlyle's peculiar attitude towards others we have in his own stories of the road with friends, and of

his partings with them there. In much we are told at this time we can see already that self-concentration and that bitterness which afterwards fell negatively on many of the celebrities around him. To look on at the play of the *Scotch negative*, though no harm be intended, is not always gratifying.

The strangeness of strangers, so to speak, and the consequent curiosity with which he gazed upon them—this for Carlyle was one half of the secret of his literature. The other half lay in the corresponding retreat into himself. The result was that he longed only to reproduce what he saw. He would bring up these very men, that was his resolve, sensuously before us. Most authors before him were content to generalise, whether in history or biography. There is very little that is definite in the ancients, or in the moderns, Hume, Gibbon, etc., that follow them. But this will never do for Carlyle. To generalise is for him to do nothing but waste paper; he must particularise. The universal is to him a pallid ghost, and impalpable: he must see instead, show us instead, the red blood of the individual. What Aristotle calls the δευτέρα οὐσία Carlyle will not look at; he must have the πρώτη οὐσία, just the τόδε τι, this one actual singular and single thing at once. And yet our business is to

think, while it is only by universals and never by singulars that we *can* think. Even Aristotle's real τόδε τι becomes in the end very much the ideal τόδε τι; that type in the individual which is the soul of the individual, and alike in all of them. But this is a universal; and the universal is a δύναμις behind the ἐνέργεια of an individual,—a far-reaching amount of pure thinking, for the like of which Carlyle had no patience.

As illustrative of Carlyle's peculiarity, in this reference we may remind that Gibbon, among articles of Eastern import into Rome, mentions "Babylonian leather;" and one cannot help thinking how Carlyle would have started at the word, how a vista into an even visible past would at once have opened before him. Not indefinite hanging gardens and indefinite Oriental luxury, but the actual water of the Euphrates running off the white pulpy sodden skin upon the *horse*, as a Babylonian, in his clogs and his waterproof apron, drew up on it the semi-circular *scraper*—it is that that would have been vivid before the eyes of Carlyle. Another excellent similar example made the round of the papers the other day, *à propos* of a letter referring to certain English ancestors of Benjamin Franklin, who were blacksmiths, it appears. Now here, Carlyle, as

usual, will not content himself with a general term, or with naming a fact generally; he must accompany it by a *picture*—of hard, horny, black hands, hammers, etc.

In the Tiecks, Schlegels, Novalis, etc., one comes sometimes on what looks like the originals of certain pictorial expressions which appear in Carlyle's earliest essays, as on the German novelists; and one thinks to one's-self what suggestion and encouragement Carlyle would take from this for the development of his own similar, but infinitely richer, native vein. It is a question, however, whether we have not nowadays this accomplishment in excess. A score of volumes, in this manner, on a single theme, become, long before the end, however scenic, wearisome. We get tired of all these accessories as it were of the stage, of all these *properties.* Many disciples of Carlyle never get beyond him. His cup becomes a fatality to them : they rest there, and see all in the fumes thence. No Carlylean friend will do a message for us but he must accompany his relative report with all the *properties*—of house, person, dress, and as graphically put as though it were the master himself that wrote. He thinks that what he has to do is to *see*, and make us see the actual particular or individual of sense.

This stroke on the part of Carlyle to the outside, the one half, could not, as said, but be joined by the other half, the correspondent counterstroke to the inside. This lay in his own intense ego, the very keenest and sharpest point of the most perfervid Scotticism. And this keenness was not literary only; it was as much, and even so, a vital centre to him in his daily life. How he kindled into the most vehement speech, almost into hysterical violence over the commonest contrarieties! It was with a perfect Berserkir rage that he appalled the sinning house-painter, or the sinning house-carpenter, or the sinning house-wench; and he was as a child in his moral indignation at the unfortunate huckster that sold the wrong tobacco. So constituted, he could not but be possessed by the mania of fault-finding and correcting. He had brought the ways, generally, too, of Ecclefechan to London, and was rather curious in his expenditure. He was hard to himself, and he was hard to others. Yet he was simple to the degree that men call greenness. He had no skill for the making of money, but the saving of it. It was friends always that he had to do business for him. Of himself, and for himself, he knew nothing of it. The John Forsters were indispensable to him. He had neither memory nor

thought for monetary or business particulars: his mind did not lie there.

It was not possible, as is evident, that, with such a temper, he could always meet those near him amiably. Imogen herself, had she been Carlyle's wife, would have shown a flush at times, and spoken her mind too. It is not known that Mrs. Carlyle did more. The Kirkcaldy schoolmaster expresses wonder at the magnificence of the country surgeon's parlour, when first admitted to it; but we need not infer, for all that, a breeding for the daughter as of one born in the purple. In ordinary circumstances, however, I cannot help thinking that Mrs. Carlyle would have proved, not only as intelligent, but as cheerful, docile, and affectionate a wife as any man might pray to be blest withal.

As much as I have said must, I think, have been patent to most people who visited Carlyle. These "Letters and Reminiscences" *had* to be printed, and they are full of the revelation, if it is one. It is hardly fair, then, to lay the blame of it upon others. There is an objection in Aristotle to Plato of what is called the Third Man (τρίτος ἄνθρωπος); suppose we call the objection indicated here the *Second Man*. Well, who in all the world is responsible for a full-length portrait of the Second Man, if not Thomas

Carlyle himself? To apply in this way Carlyle's own standard to Carlyle's own self is to do him at last only poetical justice.

We have always in the end this consolation, too, that it is not Carlyle's *second* man, but Carlyle's *first* man that will endure. Even the second man in this case is but a rough draught of the first. The second man was always so simple indeed, that he never believed himself anything but the first. Nothing can equal his surprise at the discovery that his wife found fault with him. Could he but see her again a bare five minutes, he thinks, he would easily clear all that away! And the world is coming round to this. It is beginning to leave the second man, and return to the first. The coarse colouring reflected from the former to the latter will sink in and fine itself off at last, perfecting even so the very quality it would mar. As it is with Carlyle now, so it has been with most others, and the person of the artist finally disappears in his work, if only to reappear in more essential soul.

But in point of fact, and at bottom, there is no call for apology in the case; for Carlyle, in the end, is substantially great. His generosity of feeling went out in a full tide to all that was real in humanity. And there was no pretence. Carlyle never sought

to be taken for more than he was. He was not ashamed to refuse. The element of fact and reality was all he cared for. Truth was his very blood, and the thought of his brain—truth was his soul, and he would have gone at any moment to the death for it. Of the two teachings in the world—that that points only to the animal in man, and that that sees in him, not a jot less, the god—he stood ever by the latter. In an age that witnessed the "descent of man," he would not be cheated of his birthright. The "discrepancies" in the record, which were alone, as I at least am apt to think, motives to these "descents," were as plain to him as to another; and he would not make a *felo-de-se* of his intellect. But religion was there a truth for all that, and he would not simply hate it as a lie, like the more indignant than wise enlightenment. He knew it in its spirit, if in nothing else; he knew it in its mission, in its historical function, and historical place. And so knowing, he knew also that it was with far other feelings than those of aversion and execration that it should be looked at. With all enlightenment religion was still to him *the* truth—the ether in which alone there was expansion for the spirit of man. Rapt, reverent, gentle, he still heard in his soul the rude—but assuredly scripturally grand—

prayers of his cottar father, the simple psalm-singing of his rustic brethren.

And the general result for him was, that the negative had played its part: it was now time for the affirmative. The negative, in truth, had always been something mean,—a moth that in the dark, and in the old clothes, knew nothing of the light, or of the living body that had cast them. It is precisely this part of Carlyle's function, indeed, which, though by far the most important, has been all but wholly misrepresented and ignored. In general, the misfortune still in this respect is that no workman can count upon acknowledgment who, in literature, in science, in philosophy (so called), will do more than keep on extending the negative into the mass.

It does not lie in the design of this paper to do more than remind of Carlyle's literary achievements. It is not certain that this century has seen anything in prose that can be called an *opus*, unless the "French Revolution," and it is only labour, work—earnest honest work—that has laid much valuable historical truth before us as regards the England of Cromwell and the Europe of Frederick the Second. One regrets only sometimes, and in some of these, the obstruction of a style that seems at last the exaggeration and almost the caricature of its own

self. Still, for all that, it is precisely that style of Carlyle's that, in all probability, has imported into literary statement generally a vivacity that has improved it into a new and higher level. That unparalleled incisive picturesque diction with which he struck out to our very eyes, as faithfully as any daguerreotype, a scene, a place, or a person, will not be lost: it has sunk into the mass, and must continue to function there beneficially for the future.

Carlyle lived when Dickens and Thackeray, when Tennyson and Browning lived, but there can be no doubt that of them all it was he that excited the intensest and most general interest. He was every literary young man's idol, almost the god he prayed to. Even a morsel of white paper with the name of Carlyle upon it would have been picked up from the street as a veritable amulet. No wonder that every such young man—and there were hundreds the like—brought himself, through person or through letter, into presence of the god; for it is questionable if even Voltaire attracted to himself, on the part of literary men, such an enormous mass of correspondence as, very plainly, Carlyle did. In that vast correspondence the letter with which we set out is but a drop. May it be hoped, however, that it will prove neither valueless nor uninteresting.

For my own part, I am inclined to confess—and perhaps, in the circumstances, as much will be forgiven me—I am inclined to confess that, with the "Essays" before me, with the "Mahomet" before me, still I know no more perfect piece of writing than that letter in the whole compass of the Carlyle literature; and this, whether we look to the matter, or whether we look even to the expression alone.

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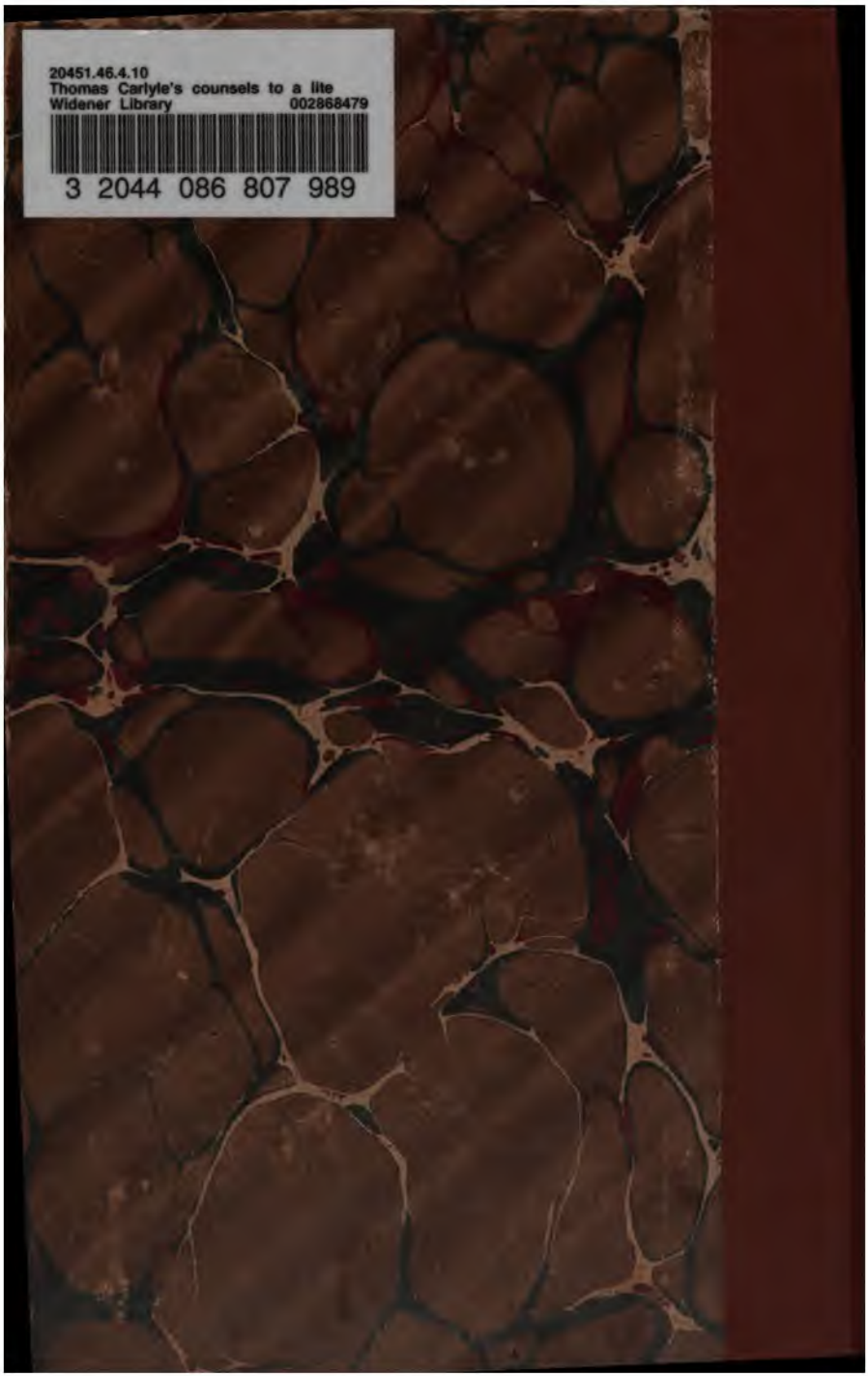
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